

The Angel as One Form of Divine Communication in the Balaam Narrative

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The tale of Balaam and the Angel is a remarkable story within the Balaam narrative, in that specific characters appear only there and subsequently drop out of the story altogether. Thus, these characters and their motifs will be considered first, then, due to the apparent independence of the narrative, some diachronic aspects will be discussed. It is, however, hardly possible to find an anchor to date it; the story might well have had a long prehistory. A diachronic treatment is all the more difficult as a skilful redactor established clear links to the following material. A verse-by-verse treatment reveals many connections to other texts with similar vocabulary. Finally, it is argued that the story of Balaam and the Angel is primarily a prophetic story discussing prophetic openness as a gift of God, with the angel being only an added interesting feature. Thus, this story fits well into the Balaam narrative, which describes various modes of divine communication.²

1. Characters and Motifs

The story of Balaam and the Angel in Num 22:22-35 has three important characters: Balaam, an angel and a female donkey. The plot is advanced through this constellation of characters, each of whom stands for a certain attribute (blindness, threat, clear-sightedness).³ The theme of sight or blindness is also expressed by specific language. The verb רָאָה is a “Leitwort” in the Balaam narrative. It appears in both the prose story and in the poetic sections and refers to different objects:

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- 1 Many thanks to Timothy B. Sailors, University of Tübingen, for improving the English version of this article.
 - 2 For other modes of divine communication in the Balaam narrative see Gass, *Modes* (forthcoming).
 - 3 The precise relationship between the figures and the attributes cannot be treated here in detail.

- a) Seeing the angel in Num 22:23, 25, 27, 31, 33.
- b) Seeing Israel in Num 22:2, 41; 23:9, 13(tris), 21; 24:2, 17.
- c) Seeing a revelation of God in Num 23:3; 24:1.
- d) Seeing further things to come in Num 24:20, 21.

Especially in Num 23 and 24, this verb highlights the beneficent status of Israel which makes cursing impossible. Merely looking at reality will reveal God's purposes. Thus, this narrative is centred round the motif of the blindness of the renowned seer Balaam. Furthermore, the angel must also be interpreted as a metaphor for the inability of Balaam to see what is most important.

2. Literary Independence

The tale of Balaam and the Angel in Num 22:22-35 interrupts the coherence of the larger narrative, and is certainly a later addition.⁴ There are several inconsistencies which point to the discreteness of the story of Balaam and the Angel: Balaam is accompanied by two servants, not by the Moabite chieftains (v.22 vs. v.21); the perplexing change in God's will, shown by sending the angel to prevent a journey by Balaam which had been previously allowed (v.20 vs. v.22); the permission to move on is redundant (v.35 vs. v.20); the divine designation is changed to YHWH in vv.22-35; and v.36 is a natural sequel to v.21.⁵

This narrative may derive from a separate source that tries to downplay Balaam's abilities since he could not see the angel in the path, whereas his donkey could. As Balaam does not refer to God allowing his journey in his apology of vv.33-34, even though threatened with death by the angel, the story of Balaam and the Angel seems to be

4 Day, *Adversary* 60-61, thinks that the story of Balaam and the Angel, which overtly ridicules the heathen diviner, stems from a much later hand than the framing narrative, which might be identified as part of the P-source. Rouillard, *L'ânesse* 238, considers the story of Balaam and the Angel a clearly separate entity which cannot be attributed to the traditional sources of the Yahwist or the Elohist.

5 See Budd, *Numbers* 256-257; Milgrom, *Numbers* 468-469; Ashley, *Book* 434-435; Klein, *Segnen* 24. Vuilleumier, *Bileam* 154, considers the saddling of the donkey in v.21 as the starting point of the interpolated story of Balaam and the Angel. Contra Schüle, *Sohn* 50-51, who differentiates between the permission for Balaam to go with the Moabite chieftains and the remaining doubt about his motivation, i.e. whether or not he wants to say what God's will is. Therefore, the story with the angel might represent serious doubt about Balaam's behaviour. Weise, *Segnen* 200-208, also considers the Balaam narrative a literary unit, whereby all inconsistencies can be explained by means of narratology.

a secondary addition deriving from a separate source.⁶ It is clearly a negative portrayal of Balaam serving to mock diviners like him, since elsewhere even ordinary mortals are able to see divine messengers.⁷ Although the anger of God over Balaam's following the Moabite men seems to contradict the divine order given in v.20,⁸ divine permission resumes in v.35,⁹ betraying the story of Balaam and the Angel as a later interpolation that does not pay due attention to the awkward logic created by this addition. Perhaps the redactor intended to add, with this augmentation, the topic of divine testing to the text.¹⁰ In that case,

6 However, there are also good reasons for understanding the story with the angel to be a later correction to the Balaam narrative. Redactional alterations discernable only in the surrounding narrative point to the conclusion that there never was a separate source with Balaam and the Angel, see Bartelmus, Eselinnen 35. Perhaps this story was compiled to install Balaam as a true prophet, since the author used significant words and themes from the legitimizing formula in Num 24:3-4 and 15-16.

7 For the negative appraisal of Balaam in this story see Rouillard, Péricope 116; Vuilleumier, Bileam 160; Levine, Numbers 138-139; Achenbach, Vollendung 403. According to Milgrom, Numbers 469, the story of Balaam and the Angel humiliates Balaam in many ways. This was also recognized by the Midrashim. Balaam's claims (prophetic sight, speech, knowledge of God, wisdom) are plainly contradicted by the story. Similarly Seters, Prophet 132: "The talking ass story is the final degradation of the faithful prophet into a buffoon who must be instructed by his own humble donkey". According to Noort, Zieners 44, the negative picture of Balaam was caused by the search for true criteria to determine who is a prophet in the seventh century BCE. Knierim / Coats, Numbers 261, consider the fable an anti-legend highlighting the negative virtue of the prophet.

Contra Schüle, Sohn 64-65, who sees the topic of obedience as crucial for the story of Balaam and the donkey, giving this episode a dramatic-tragic colouring. Similarly Schmitt, Mantiker 253, who thinks that this story intends to transform the heathen mantic Balaam to a prophet of יהוה.

8 Schmidt, Bileam 339-340, points out that this story contradicts God's permission for Balaam to follow the Moabite chieftains in Num 22:20-21. He thinks that it is unlikely that a later redactor has inserted the story of Balaam and the Angel into an earlier Balaam narrative; this would be out of keeping with later sensibilities as there is no evidence elsewhere that God becomes angry when someone obeys his commands. See also Schmidt, Buch 123. According to Graupner, Elohist 160-161, this contradiction indicates two different descriptions of the plot. Levin, Jahwist 387-388, solves this inconsistency by assigning the account of Num 22:13-20 to a secondary redaction.

Kellenberger, Jahwes 70-71, mentions other narratives that describe a rather arbitrary and almost incomprehensible attitude of God. Similarly Moore, Balaam 101, detects "a perplexing propensity for reversal" within the Balaam narrative. According to Bellingier, Leviticus 265, this narrative affirms "the divine mystery and the warning not to presume on God's favor".

9 Milgrom, Numbers 469, considers v.35 a repetitive resumption repeating vv.20-21.

10 For the story of Balaam and the Angel as a case of testing, see Staubli, Bücher 300-301; Klein, Segnen 28.

the apparent contradiction could be resolved by viewing God's words in v.20 as ironic and seeking to teach Balaam a lesson.¹¹

In addition to different designations being used for God within the Balaam narrative, a מלאך יהוה is mentioned only in the story about the angel.¹² The מלאך יהוה usually has the function of a messenger, as can be shown etymologically by its dependence on the root לִאֵךְ ("to send"). However, in Num 22 the angel is sent as a threat;¹³ its message here is to prevent Balaam from carrying out his intentions. The angel is clearly distinguished from יהוה, so it cannot be a temporary manifestation of God.¹⁴ The variant idiom מלאך אלהים is not used here, although this title is widespread within the Hebrew Bible (especially in connection with non-Israelites) and can also be used in the plural form unlike מלאך יהוה.¹⁵

3. The Story

The story of Balaam and the Angel will now be described in chronological order, verse by verse, to show the texture of the skilfully narrated passage and to better appreciate the import of certain phraseology.

In v.22 the anger of God is kindled when Balaam goes to Balak. The anger formula (חַרָּה אֶף – widespread in the Bible – is used thrice in the Balaam narrative and functions as a structuring device.¹⁶ First God's anger is kindled, then Balaam's and finally Balak's. Thus, this idiom connects the story of Balaam and the Angel to the wider context. The

11 See Moberly, Learning 9-10. Weise, Segnen 106, explains the apparent contradiction through the use of the prepositions. Balaam goes with the Moabite messengers (expressed with עִם) in contrast to God's permission to go with them (expressed with אִתּוֹ). Thus, he makes common cause with them. This distinction based on the usage of the prepositions is problematic. For example, the presence of God with someone ("Beistandsformel") can be expressed with both prepositions, see e.g. Gen 39:3 or 1Sam 18:12. Sakenfeld, Numbers 126, supposes that Balaam secretly hoped that God's mind had changed.

12 Num 22:22, 23, 24, 25, 26, 27, 31, 32, 34, 35.

13 See Seebass, Engel 583-584. According to Achenbach, Vollendung 404, the Angel of יהוה is used in the Pentateuch when the people are not (yet) ready for a direct revelation from יהוה, either due to their provenance or their state of knowledge.

14 Ashley, Book 455. Contra Davies, Numbers 250; Bellinger, Leviticus 267.

15 See Gen 21:17; 28:12(pl); 31:11; 32:3(pl); Exod 14:19; Judg 6:20; 13:6, 9; 1Sam 29:9; 2Sam 14:17, 20; 19:28; 2Chr 36:16.

The variant מלאך יהוה is used in Gen 16:7, 9, 10, 11; 22:11, 15; Exod 3:2; Num 22:22, 23, 24, 25, 26, 27, 31, 32, 34, 35; Judg 2:1, 4; 5:23; 6:11, 12, 21, 22(bis); 13:3, 13, 15, 16(bis), 17, 18, 20, 21(bis); 2Sam 24:16; 1Kgs 19:7; 2Kgs 1:3, 15; 19:35; 1Chr 21:12, 15, 16, 18, 30; Ps 34:8; 35:5, 6; Isa 37:36; Hag 1:13; Zech 1:11, 12; 3:1, 5, 6; 12:8; Mal 2:7.

16 See Num 22:22, 27; 24,10.

cast consists of Balaam riding on his donkey and his two servants (נַעֲרָיו),¹⁷ whereas the Moabite messengers are not mentioned. It is not said whether the numerous Moabite chieftains of v.15 (שָׂרִים רַבִּים), who are also called servants or chieftains of Balak in v.18 and v.35 (בָּלָק) (עֲבָדֵי/שָׂרִי) and chieftains of Moab in v.21 (שָׂרֵי מוֹאָב), are also part of the entourage. This is just one point of tension which sets this story apart from the context. Most probably the mention of two servants is a literary stereotype signifying Balaam as a person of eminence, who would usually have been accompanied by two servants.¹⁸ Conspicuously, Balaam's servants quit the scene after their unexpected appearance, whereas the chieftains of Moab/Balak appear both in v.21 and v.35 – in that respect framing the story of the encounter with the angel –, but play no role in the embedded narrative. On the other hand, the story in Num 22:21-35 is advanced by יְהוָה, the Angel of יְהוָה, the donkey and Balaam. As the Moabites are not important for the plot, the storyteller could readily dismiss them and concentrate on the main characters. יְהוָה and the Angel of יְהוָה are in full control of the narrated events, whereas the donkey and Balaam are only reacting.¹⁹ The Angel of יְהוָה, who appears ten times in the Balaam narrative,²⁰ takes his stand on the road to hamper the way of the travellers (תִּד-יָצַב). In virtue of Num 23:3, 15 and other occurrences, this verb cannot denote a total blocking of the way.²¹ Thus, the first time the angel blocks their path, it is still possible to change course. The angel acts as an opponent of Balaam. The word שָׂטָן refers not to an opposing figure in the heavenly court like in Zech 3 and Job 1-2, but to an ordinary adversary.²²

17 Achenbach, Vollendung 403, considers the mention of the two servants as indication of the fragmentary status of the story of Balaam and the Angel. Bartelmus, Eselinnen 38 n.33 regards the two servants as a later gloss. In Num 24:12 they are called messengers sent by Balak (מְלָאכִיךְ), perhaps in opposition to the angel sent by the Lord (מַלְאֲכֵי יְהוָה).

18 Milgrom, Numbers 190; Cole, Numbers 390; Schmidt, Buch 133. In this regard, one can refer to Gen 22 and 1Sam 28. Similarly Weise, Segnen 101 n.80. According to Staubli, Bücher 300, this is an ironic underscoring of the supposed importance of Balaam. Budd, Numbers 266, points out that these servants are identified as Jannes and Jambres by the Palestinian Targum.

19 It is יְהוָה who opens the mouth of the donkey and the eyes of Balaam.

20 See Num 22:22, 23, 24, 25, 26, 27, 31, 32, 34, 35.

21 תִּד-יָצַב + כּ is also used in Exod 1:17; Deut 31:14; 1Sam 10:23; 2Sam 21:5; 23:12; 1Chr 11:14. It most probably denotes "to stand ostensibly on sth.", in which case the תִּד-stem is interpreted as imitative ("to play the status of the verb's meaning"). For this function of the תִּד-stem see Irsigler, Einführung 93. According to Levine, Numbers 155, תִּד-יָצַב elsewhere describes "the posture of divine beings in theophany" or "attendance upon divine beings".

22 See Sakenfeld, Numbers 127; Schmidt, Buch 133. In that respect, Levine, Numbers 155, thinks that the noun שָׂטָן is typical of the diction of late pre-exilic historical

In v.23 the angel is described as a great danger to the travellers. The donkey sees the angel standing in the road with his sword drawn in his hand. The angel is further described by the nominal clause (וַחֲרָבוֹ שְׁלוּפָה) (בידו). This idiom is a familiar way to describe either the Angel of the Lord or the chieftain of the heavenly army.²³ Apparently, heavenly messengers are sometimes armed and can cause fear and prostration as well. From a synchronic perspective the Angel of the Lord could be interpreted here as the chieftain of the heavenly army like in Josh 5:13-14. Thus, he is not a mere messenger but a high-ranking commander who has the power to command the heavenly host. In that respect he is not a single soldier, rather he is endowed with divine might. This dreadful appearance awes the donkey so that she turns off the path and into a field.²⁴ Balaam strikes the donkey, punishing her stubbornness. In this episode the verb נָכָה is used mainly in the episode with the angel,²⁵ only at the beginning of the Balaam narrative in Num 22:6 does it refer to the intended beating of Israel when being cursed by Balaam. In the context of the Balaam narrative this verb is always connected with an angry reaction while being blinded to reality (i.e. to Israel's beneficent status or to the Angel of the Lord). The notice in Num 22:6 could perhaps be interpreted in such a way that the beating of Israel is a sin comparable to the impatient and blind reaction of Balaam. In the story with the angel, the professional diviner Balaam – presumably an expert at interpreting omens – is not able to realize, through the peculiar behaviour of his donkey, that the deity has a message for him.²⁶

books, in that it lacks the notion of the determined noun in Zech and Job or the proper name Satan. Moberly, *Prophet 10*, draws a parallel to 1Kgs 11 where Hadad and Razon are also called adversaries to Solomon. Similarly, the angel is an opposing figure symbolizing divine disfavour. According to Day, *Adversary* 65, שֹׁטֵן means both “adversary” and “legal opponent”. Rouillard, *Péripécopé* 120-121, regards the angel as having the function of an obstacle, but not as the opponent in and of itself.

23 This idiom is used in Num 22:23, 31 and in Josh 5:13; 1Chr 21:16. According to Gross, *Bileam* 349, this expression is not a “formelhaftes oder vorgeprägtes Attribut des mal'ak”. Levine, *Numbers* 156, uses this idiom to date the story of Balaam and the Angel (late pre-exilic or early postexilic). Similarly Schmitt, *Mantiker* 251-252. Day, *Adversary* 64, thinks that the sword-wielding messenger could also be interpreted as שֹׁטֵן in the other accounts.

24 נָכָה-G + מִן + דֶּרֶךְ is used only here and in Job 31:7. In both cases it denotes the meaning “to turn away from the road”. נָכָה-G + מִן is also found in Num 22:33 and Prov 4:5 with the same connotation. The root נָכָה is used six times in the Balaam narrative, mostly in G-stem, see Num 22:23, 26, 33(bis). Only in Num 22:23 is it used with the double accusative in H-stem “to bring back so. to sth.” and in Num 24:6 in N-stem with the meaning “to stretch afar”. According to Levine, *Numbers* 156, this verb displays two aspects: transitive and stative.

25 See Num 22:23, 25, 27, 28, 32.

26 Wenham, *Numbers* 170-171.

According to vv.24-25, the angel stands²⁷ in the narrow path among the vineyards so that the entourage could hardly pass by. As in the first encounter, the donkey sees²⁸ the angel and squeezes herself against the wall. The fearful reaction of the donkey evokes the anger of the still blinded Balaam whose foot was scraped against the wall by the donkey, most probably when trying to dodge the angelic obstacle.²⁹ And again Balaam struck the donkey. This is expressed by the modifying verb יסף, which stands in prominent places within the Balaam narrative and denotes continuation and intensification.³⁰

In v.26 the angel moves and completely blocks the path, leaving no room to pass by on either side. Seeing the Angel of the Lord the donkey realizes that it is impossible to pass by and, according to v.27, she lies down under Balaam. The verb רבץ, when used with the donkey, does not have the specialized meaning “to prostrate”, and lacks any cultic connotations.³¹ It seems that the story unfolds by progressively moving from an ordinary road to a path through a vineyard to a narrow part of the path which is now blocked so that it is not possible for the donkey to pass by. Therefore, she has to lie down and await further instructions. It is apparent that the angel lured Balaam into a trap and finally into an inevitable confrontation.³² The obstinate behaviour of the don-

27 This is expressed with עמד-G which appears in Num 22:24, 26 and is different from Num 22:23 נצב-N, the first blocking of the road by the angel. According to Levine, Numbers 157, this verb denotes “to halt” and creates a contrast with עבר “to pass by”. Kellenberger, Widerstand 71, thinks that עבר is a “Theophaniebegriff” and characterizes the story as an experience of divine revelation. Contra Bartelmus, Eselinnen 38 n.34. The verb עבר has a multitude of denotations, making a restriction to a special meaning unnecessary.

28 ראה + אתון + מלאך יהוה is used in a parallel expression in Num 23:23, 25, 27. All three times, the donkey sees the angel opposing Balaam and therefore protects Balaam from the armed Angel of the Lord. This idiom is also used in the speech of the angel who, furthermore, threatens Balaam and points out that only the donkey has safeguarded Balaam.

29 רחץ-N, which is only used here, is most probably to be interpreted as reflexive due to the usage of this verb in G-stem to govern a direct object in the same verse.

30 See Num 22:15 with the second attempt to engage Balaam as a sorcerer, Num 22:19 with the second inquiry of Balaam towards God, Num 22:25 with Balaam’s second beating of the donkey, and Num 22:26 with the angel’s second blocking of the path (which is actually the third appearance of the angel standing in the path). According to Moberly, Learning 7 n.16, the verb יסף usually denotes continuation and augmentation.

31 Normally it describes animals lying down to rest or the crouching of a mule under a heavy burden. Thus, there is no clear subtlety in the author’s description, contra Levine, Numbers 156. It may refer to the donkey crouching down and awaiting a command from the angel.

32 See especially Levine, Numbers 157.

key crosses Balaam and he strikes her a third time.³³ There is apparently an escalation in the reactions of Balaam: in v.23 he strikes the donkey to get her back on the road, in v.25 he strikes her again – expressed with *סֵי* – but with no special purpose and in v.27 he strikes her with his stick.³⁴

However, according to v.28, *יְהוָה* is in complete control of the situation. He opens³⁵ the mouth of the donkey, which, after the story of the serpent in Gen 3, is the second time an animal speaks to human beings in the Bible, though this time with positive connotations. Unlike Gen 3, the donkey does not possess the power of speech by herself. In vv.28-30 the donkey accuses Balaam of striking her three times without just cause and defends her overall loyalty to her master, whereas Balaam thought he was being made a fool and threatened to kill the donkey with a sword.³⁶ The stubborn desire of Balaam to kill the animal corresponds to the subsequently revealed intent of the angel to kill Balaam himself. Due to his blindness Balaam was at risk of losing his life, all the while complaining about the loyal animal that was protecting him. Only after the discussion with the donkey is Balaam forced to admit that her behaviour was quite unusual, as she had always been absolutely reliable before. As a distinguished seer he should have recognized the behaviour of his donkey as unusual. In this respect, the story criticises the blindness of a seer who does not apprehend the obvious. It is noteworthy that the donkey merely reminds Balaam of her lifelong

33 Like in v.22 anger is kindled (*חָרָה אֵף*), but now it is not *יְהוָה*'s. For the parallel between both verses see Weise, Segnen 102-103.

34 The noun *מִקֵּל* is determined, which is noteworthy since the stick was not mentioned before. Levine, Numbers 157, apparently thinks that Balaam has struck his donkey three times, each time harder than the last, with his walking stick which would usually have been made of wood. All in all, the use of a stick is an indication of his mounting anger and apparently conveys escalation, see Sherwood, Numbers 176. Milgrom, Numbers 191, supposes that he previously struck the donkey with his hand or a strap.

Milgrom, Numbers 190, considers the stick a surrogate for a sword. Moore, Balaam 103, holds *מִקֵּל* as a "riding crop, not as a magical source of power". For this word see also Ashley, Book 452 n.4.

35 The verb *פָּתַח* is mentioned only here, whereas the verb *גָּלַה* is used to express the opening of the eyes of Balaam in Num 22:31; 24:4, 16. This might be due to the usual usage insofar as *פָּתַח*-G is never used with *עֵינִי*. For a comparison of the speaking donkey with the snake in Gen 3, see Savran, Speech 33-55; Seebass, Numeri 52. According to Levin, Jahwist 387, the donkey's speaking is a secondary element.

36 This may be meant to resemble the angel with a drawn sword in v.23 and 31. Douglas, Wilderness 221, regards Balaam's reaction as absurd since killing the donkey is not proportionate to her making a fool of him.

loyal service to him, whereas יהוה allows Balaam to see.³⁷ The impeding threat of the angel is not communicated to Balaam by his donkey.

In v.31 יהוה opens Balaam's eyes so that he can see the angel with a drawn sword (as in v.23). This is in accord with Exod 4:11, where יהוה is credited with making humans dumb or deaf and sighted or blind.³⁸ Immediately Balaam understands the situation, bows down and prostrates himself before the angel. The verbs used in this verse often appear in a cultic context, so one may also assume such connotations here.³⁹ The angel now explains everything to Balaam in vv.32-33, maintaining that he would have killed Balaam but not the donkey if she had not turned aside. The accusation of the donkey is renewed, but also enhanced in that the angel refers to the donkey's ability to see (an ability which fortunately saved Balaam's life) in contrast to the blindness of Balaam.⁴⁰ Moreover, due to the use of the same idioms, it is as though Balaam's beating the donkey has affected the angel himself.⁴¹

The angel primarily uses idioms which appear frequently throughout the story of Balaam and the Angel: *נכה אתון*, *שליש רגלים*, *שטן*, *דרך*, *הרג*, *הרג*, *נטה ל/מפני*.⁴² However, this is of no help for literary criticism, since

37 Levine, Numbers 157, argues that the donkey appeals to Balaam's gratitude and that the angel enlightened Balaam. However, neither of these notions can be sustained by the text. It seems to be an overinterpretation of the text when one accords the expression "three times" a certain subtlety which would refer to annual pilgrimage festivals making Balaam's mission one undertaken at divine command. Contra Levine, Numbers 158.

38 According to Wagner, Elemente 90, the opening of Balaam's eyes is a theophany initiated by God and revealing God's hitherto unknown presence. Cole, Numbers 394, points out that Balaam has now encountered God during the daytime. This can be seen as a development, since he previously encountered God only at night.

39 See *עין גלה* + *G/D* in Num 22:31; 24:4, 16; Ps 119:18. According to Schmidt, Bileam 340, this expression implies that Balaam has visionary qualities only once יהוה has opened his eyes.

קודד and *חווה-St* are a familiar idiom for "to bow down and prostrate", see Gen 24:26, 48; 43:28; Exod 4:31; 12:27; 34:8; Num 22:31; 1Sam 24:9; 28:14; 1Kgs 1:16, 31; 1Chr 29:20; 2Chr 29:30; Neh 8:6. It can be used in cultic and ordinary contexts. For the root *חווה-St*, see also Levine, Numbers 158-159.

Even *מלאך ראה* + *G* is a fixed idiom, see Num 22:23, 25, 27, 31; Judg 6:22; 1Chr 21:16, 20.

40 See Knierim / Coats, Numbers 256.

41 Bartelmus, Eselinnen 39.

42 *נכה אתון* in Num 22:23, 25, 27, 28, 32 (twice with ePP);

שליש רגלים in Num 22:28, 32, 33;

שטן in Num 22:22, 32;

דרך in Num 22:22, 23 (tris), 26, 31, 32, 34;

הרג in Num 22:29, 33;

נטה ל/מפני in Num 22:23, 33 (bis).

this peculiarity only stresses the tightly-knit nature of this account and the literary skill of its author. The angel also explains to Balaam that he had come forth as שֵׁטֶן. In the angel's judgement, Balaam's journey was undertaken too hastily, without first sincerely consulting יהוה.⁴³ In that respect, the angel acts as legal opponent, charging Balaam with undertaking his journey without divine consent.

Balaam admits in v.34 that he has sinned (חטא), but he excuses⁴⁴ his sin by maintaining that he did not know about the angel standing in the road. The verb ידע – also a structuring device within the story – is first used by Balak, who knows about the effectiveness of Balaam's speech; later this verb is employed in reference to the realization of God's will and the presence of the angel.⁴⁵ Furthermore, Balaam will refrain from going to Balak if this displeases the angel (רע בעיניך).

The angel allows Balaam to go with the chieftains of Balak in v.35, but he is only to deliver the word given by the angel. This last command differs from v.38, where God, not the angel (who disappears after Num 22:35 without further reference), gives Balaam a prophecy in his mouth.⁴⁶ Thus, the word given by the angel could be an indication that the angel is a manifestation of God. Even the formula רע בעיניך

The verb ירט, however, remains elusive as it occurs only in Job 16:11-12, and there only tentatively, see Levine, Numbers 159. Based on the versions Lapsley, Exegesis 25, interprets this word as "perverse". Similarly Budd, Numbers 266. For Ashley, Book 453 n.9, the MT is textually corrupt.

43 See Day, Adversary 65-66, although the interpretation of ירט is a crux interpretum. For a meaning of "to rush headlong" like its Arabic cognate see Greene, Balaam 26. Similarly Weise, Segnen 104. Douglas, Wilderness 217, considers Balaam's „obedience to the will of God a set of lies“. Balaam still tries to get the promised fee for cursing Israel. Knierim / Coats, Numbers 262, refer especially to the weakness of Balaam and his willingness to curse Israel for money which ultimately led to an ironic result. North, Sanctions 205-206, also thinks that Balaam had his price. Brown, Message 209, also assumes that Balaam "thought he might make a small fortune by telling Balak things he wanted to hear" for he initially relied on correctly performing rituals to manipulate deities.

44 The first כי seems best explained as adversative "but I did not know that". The use of the verb ידע is most probably a pun on Num 24:16 which claims that Balaam obtains knowledge from God, see Milgrom, Numbers 192.

According to Wagner, Elemente 90-91, the sin committed by Balaam refers not to moral misconduct but to culpable blindness, whereas Greene, Balaam 26-27, renders the verb חטא as a legal term indicating the breach of a previously agreed upon covenantal relationship.

45 See Num 22:6 and Num 22:19, 34; Num 24:16.

46 Schmidt, Bileam 340-341, thinks that Balaam went home after the encounter with the angel in the original account of the story (which he assigns to a Yahwistic source). This is allegedly found in v.37 where Balak goes to Balaam to hire him again. However, Gross, Bileam 25-129; Schmitt, Mantiker 250-251; and Seebass, Numeri 29, have already convincingly refuted this theory.

might indicate that the angel acts on behalf of God, since this idiom is most often connected with God (רַע בְּעֵינֵי יְהוָה). However, the angel and יְהוָה are clearly differentiated in Num 22:22-35, so they cannot be identified there. Moreover, v.35 is a slightly altered repetition of v.20. Its appearance in the mouth of the angel is due to redactional work, but is not intended to identify God and the angel. The other formula (רַע בְּעֵינֶיךָ) could be explained by a misunderstanding of Balaam himself, who attributes divine qualities to the angel, as is demonstrated by his prostration. Thus, the angel and God must be differentiated in this account, giving the angel the role of merely an instrument used by God to accomplish his aims.

4. Conclusion

The narrative of Balaam and the Angel is clearly a prophetic story belonging to the genre of „divine testing of a prophet“. The angel – invisible to Balaam at first – and the talking donkey are devices used to illustrate the abilities and disabilities of a true prophet. This episode reveals a lesson for Balaam and for every real prophet. In that respect, the tale of the donkey seems to be a testing of the prophet and thus comparable to other prophetic accounts. After the encounter with the angel Balaam is allowed not only to do (עֲשֶׂה), but to speak (דַּבֵּר) God's will,⁴⁷ allowing him to act as a true prophet of God.

However, this narrative demonstrates only one way of coming into contact with the divine sphere. Within the final form of the Balaam narrative, even more modes of divine communication are introduced: Balaam gets in touch with the divine sphere by an encounter with God and God's Angel, by an audition, by consulting omens and finally by a "real" vision. Thus, there is a certain progression and dynamic in the way Balaam receives the message of God. All modes of divine communication in the Balaam narrative are subservient to the will of יְהוָה and can even be given to a non-Israelite diviner who is labelled as a worshipper of יְהוָה.⁴⁸

All in all, the story has a lot of folkloristic details like the talking animal, the angel, the naive anti-hero and the overall narrative structure.⁴⁹ Furthermore, the narrative of the angel is a story of many contrasts sustaining one major point: prophetic sightedness or blindness

47 Bartelmus, Eselinnen 41-42.

48 This is apparently a later literary stage in the Balaam tradition, see the remarks in Gass, Stern 261-263.

49 See Staubli, Bücher 301.

are the domain of God alone and cannot be controlled by man. Moreover, the story of Balaam and the Angel has a certain comic element.⁵⁰ Apparently this story was the starting-point of the biblical and extra-biblical portrayal of Balaam as an infamous blind and evil seer.

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50 The renowned seer does not see the angel whereas the donkey does. Balaam is violent and incensed whereas the donkey is loyal and intelligent. Concerning the comic element, see especially Douglas, *Wilderness 221*: “broad slapstick”; Davies, *Numbers 247*; “comic irony”. For a comparison between the donkey, Balaam and Balak see North, *Sanctions 211-212*.

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